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Sexual Violence and D.C. Comics

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze the history of the disturbing, often dismissive treatment of sexual violence in comic books through social conflict theory. Social conflict theory is a Marxist argument that society is a series of violent interactions wherein privileged groups exploit those with less power. I explore the way the prevalent mistreatment of sexual violence in DC Comics is a part of gendered conflict, and how this depiction of sexualized violence affects our understanding of sexual violence in the real world. Rather than suggest that all depictions of sexual violence and abuse are harmful, I examine more constructive, narratively driven examples of characters experiences with sexual violence and how these depictions are a step forward for the comic industry.

Despite the recent renewal of empowering, female-driven storylines, DC Comics has a long and troubled past due to the depiction of the mistreatment of female characters. In fact, the trope "Women in Refrigerators"—used to describe how female characters are often killed, maimed, or disempowered in order to advance the plot of a male character—originated as a reference to *Green Lantern #54,* published in 1994 (Marz). The hero returns home to find his girlfriend, Alexandra DeWitt, murdered and stuffed into his refrigerator. While violence will always have an integral role in comic books, DC Comics' history and continuation of gendered violence remains troubling. The purpose of this paper is to analyze some of DC Comics' violent issues through a social conflict approach, primarily examining how gender relations contribute to violence, especially rape or sexual assault, even within a fictitious story. The four main characters depicted in these issues—Barbara Gordon, James Gordon, Dick Grayson, and Harley Quinn—demonstrate the ways depictions of sexual violence rip agency away from otherwise empowering characters. This paper also examines the necessity of including sexual violence in stories and offer up ways in which it can be included in plotlines in a manner that empowers survivors, rather than revictimizes them. Comic book artists do not need to depict the act of rape in order to create compelling and convincing stories. The decision to include these acts only reinforces a culture that accepts sexual violence as part of its citizens' lives. Instead, comic book artists should work to develop narratives that challenge this complacency.

Social conflict theory takes roots in Marxism, arguing that individuals and groups interact within society on the basis of conflict rather than consensus. Groups fight over vari-

ous amounts of resources, and those with more resources use this power to exploit those with less power. These resources can be material (e.g., water, food, capital) or non-material (e.g., status). While social conflict theory is often applied to social classes, in this work I examine gender conflict, and specifically how fictitious depictions of sexual violence strip power from women, placing them in unequal status with their male counterparts.

The character of Barbara Gordon exists to be a female counterpart to iconic superhero Batman. She made her debut appearance in January of 1967 in *Detective Comics #359* and the live action show *Batman* later that same year (McAvennie & Dolan). Barbara, the daughter of Gotham City police commissioner James Gordon, spends her free time secretly patrolling the streets as Batgirl. After the events of *The Killing Joke,* she is left paralyzed from the waist down. She is later re-established as the computer expert and information broker known as Oracle and often provides intelligence and computer hacking services to assist other superheroes, including Batman.

The issue that reshaped the character of Barbara Gordon, *The Killing Joke*, focuses on the backstory of Batman's perhaps most famous adversary, the Joker. This helps readers understand the tragedy behind his downfall and demonstrates how closely Joker's story mirrors that of Bruce Wayne. A large portion of the story revolves around the Joker torturing the Gordon family. *The Killing Joke* displays Barbara's torture in an almost sexual manner, writhing in agonizing pain after having been brutally shot (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The shooting of Barbara Gordon

Barbara's father does not fare much better, as later he is paraded through a carnival naked and chained. In Figure 2, Commissioner Gordon mirrors the panel of the Joker unbuttoning Barbara's shirt—demonstrating the emasculation of sexual assault. This is unsettling because men are placed in the vulnerable positions as victims of sexual assault—depictions usually reserved for women.

Not only is Commissioner Gordon symbolically castrated by his own nakedness and vulnerability, readers are to understand that his inability to protect his daughter Barbara further undermines his masculinity. The illustrations of Barbara in these panels are presumably meant to represent the pictures taken by the Joker as he strips her down to perform the single most disempowering act: rape.

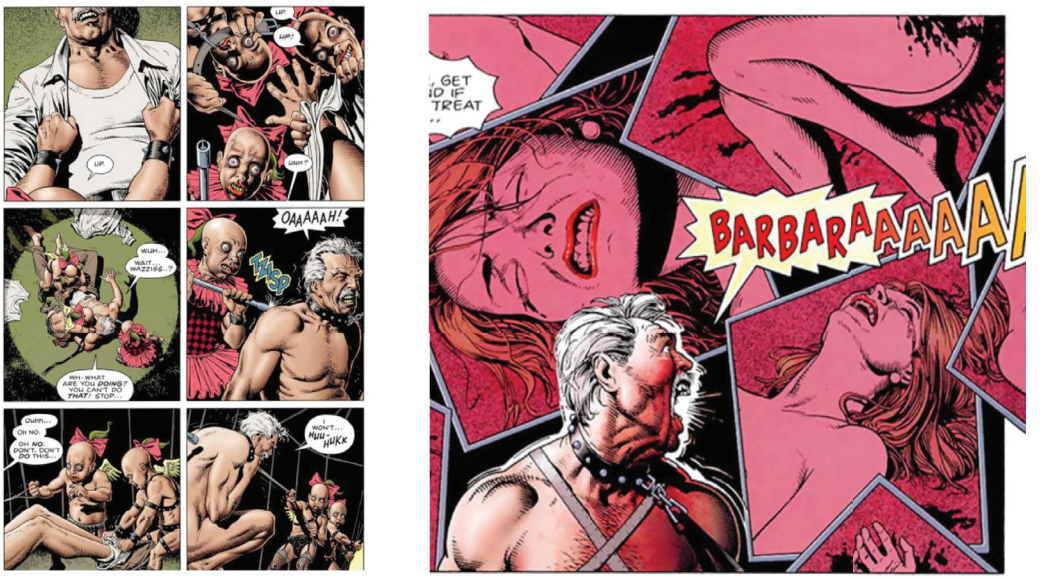

Figure 2: The victimization of Commisioner Gordon

Despite the controversy it caused, *The Killing Joke* remains one of DC's most popular comics to this day, managing to top *The New York Times* bestseller list 28 years after release (2016). The comic has been adapted into a cartoon that grossed over $4 million worldwide (Nash Information Services).

Steven Kirsch and Paul Olczak (2002) argue why such graphic depictions of violence, on display in *The Killing Joke* and in other in comics, are troubling:

> Although the impact of media violence has been underreported by news services, research has consistently found that exposure to violent media appears to increase aggressive behavior, thoughts, and feelings in children, adolescents, and young adults. The vast majority of this research has focused on portrayals of violence in television, movies, and, more recently, video games. However, an understudied source of violent content to which children and adolescents are exposed comes from comic books. (p. 1160)

This study recorded the effects of violent comic books on social information processing. Participants in the study were given either nonviolent comics, such as *Archie, Dexter's Laboratory,* and *The Rugrats*, or extremely violent comics including *Homicide, Curse of the Spawn*, and *Dark Realm*. After reading their assigned comics, participants read a series of ambiguous provocation situations and asked to respond as though they were ten years old. Some stories contained overt aggression, such as standing on the playground when another child hit them in the back with a ball. Others contained relational aggression, such as a childhood friend playing with another child that they did you do not like very much; physical harm was not involved. Participants were to evaluate their reactions to these scenarios. After all the responses were made, they were sorted into three categories: Highly aggressive responses (such as, "I'd hit them or make them suffer."), moderately aggressive responses (such as, "I'd spread a rumor about them."), and neutral or positive responses (such as, "They didn't know I sat down."). Higher scores reflected on more aggressive responses and behaviors. The study demonstrated that participants who read extremely violent comic books responded with more hostility to both overt and relational aggressions. Researchers also found significant gender differences as well. Men were more likely to respond with a high amount of aggression when overt aggression was used, while women were more likely to respond with a high amount of aggression when relational aggression used. Men also responded more favorably to extremely violent comic books, while women were more likely to prefer nonviolent comic books.

Why do these findings matter? Women are significantly more likely to experience sexual violence in their lifetime. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network found that in 2013, nine out of every ten rape victims in the United States were women (RAINN). Depictions of sexual assault in *The Killing Joke* not only reinforce the idea that women's bodies are meant to be violated, but the vast number of cosplays and fanart inspired by this version of the Joker would suggest that its readers view these behaviors as something to emulate. However, despite how valuable the research presented here is, it also has gaps. Most data on sexual assault does not consider the vast amount of sexual violence committed against trans and nonbinary persons, nor the fact that men are less likely to come forward if they are sexually assaulted. While RAINN also finds that only 1 in 33 American men will experience an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, there is likely a significant amount of the population that simply has not reported their assault (RAINN). It is troubling not only that the true statistics behind sexual assault may remain forever hidden, but that men are depicted as free from its impact.

Male characters are also victims of sexual violence in DC Comics. Introduced in the April 1940 issue *Detective Comics #38* as a young acrobat, Dick Grayson becomes an orphan when Gotham's mafia murders his parents (Finger). Millionaire Bruce Wayne takes him in as a legal ward and trains him as the original Robin. In addition to helping Batman fight crime, Dick establishes himself as the leader of the Teen Titans. He soon tires of working under Bruce and takes on his own identity as Nightwing. He

spends a significant amount of time protecting the neighboring city of Bludhaven, both as Nightwing and as a rookie police officer.

Nightwing Vol. 2 #93 takes place in the turbulent city of Bludhaven, where the villain Blockbuster is wreaking havoc. Right away the comic fridges a female character. Nightwing's girlfriend Maxine Michaels is gunned down to further his angst. Afterwards, Blockbuster tells Nightwing that he will kill not just Maxine, but everyone Nightwing has ever loved. While this in itself is traumatic, Nightwing also feels pressure to follow the one rule Batman continuously instilled in him: "Don't kill. Ever." (Grayson, 2004).

The final scenes of *Nightwing Vol. 2 #93* remain some of DC Comics' more controversial panels. Tarantula, a vigilante named Catalina Flores who kills without remorse, shoots and kills Blockbuster. Nightwing, as he made no attempt to stop Tarantula, is represented with Blockbuster's blood literally on his hands, causing him to break down. Fuzzy speech bubbles and a dizzying shot of the stairs represent the extent of his emotional distress. He makes it to the roof where he collapses, and in a very difficult scene to read, Tarantula take advantage of Nightwing's extremely vulnerable state. Despite his inability to consent, and the fact that he manages to say, "Don't touch me," she engages in sex with him anyway (Grayson, 2004). Readers then see a framing of Tarantula on top of Nightwing, with her back arched, facing upward, and hair cascading down her body in a classic "sexy" pose. All this time, Nightwing repeats, "Never gonna stop." Everything about the way the comic is set up suggests he was in no state to consent.

When asked in a 2004 interview shortly after the comic's release why she chose to introduce rape into a story about a male character, the comic's author, Devin Grayson, coyly answered, "For the record, I've never used the word 'rape,' I just said it was nonconsensual." She further explained how "rewarding" it is to place heroes in these types of situations, as it can "challenge them as people as well as superheroes" (Burtis, 2004). Grayson's relaxed attitude about rape depicted in the comic is disturbing, especially considering that following this issue, Nightwing goes on to date Tarantula and the rooftop assault is never mentioned again.

Another area of controversy, introduced by long-time fans of the boy wonder, is Dick Grayson's coding as bisexual. As readers see in an earlier issue, Dick encounters a fellow cop being harassed for his sexual orientation. Dick steps in to stop the violence, and when asked, "What *are* you Grayson, his boyfriend?" the vigilante answers, "So what if I am?" While Dick is not intimately involved with this man, many readers believe his willingness to be perceived as gay suggests some fluidity in his orientation.

This potential element of Dick's character introduces another group that are victims of gender conflict. I would like to expand and include members of the LGBTQ community, particularly men, as likely victims. This issue of *Nightwing* is not the first time Dick was sexually assaulted. Though less graphic than Tarantula's assault, Nightwing's ally Mirage poses as his girlfriend, Starfire, and has sex with him in an issue of Teen

Titans. Like in *The Killing Joke*, these plotlines emphasize the idea that rape and sexual assault are intended as an emasculating experience. It breaks down otherwise untouchable characters and is seen as exceptionally "rewarding" when it occurs unexpectedly.

When used freely as a plot device, sexual assault becomes expected, especially when performed on more vulnerable groups. This is problematic when readers consider how it exploits an experience many women will go through in their lifetime, but also how it belittles male victims of rape or sexual assault, who are already unlikely to come forward for fear of judgement and not taken seriously when they do (RAINN). Plotlines like that of *Nightwing #93* only reinforce ideas that prevent victims of sexual abuse from receiving help.

Devin Grayson was later interviewed in 2015 for a collection of essays celebrating the original Robin. In this interview, she offered an apology for her glib remarks on depicting rape in her comic: "Rape is used so casually in comics as a gesture of 'something really bad happened to someone,' and I am deeply sorry to have contributed to that trope" (Geaman, 2015). Grayson's apology shows the potential for growth in the comic industry.

The growth of understanding in the comic industry is demonstrated best by the character development of Harley Quinn. Harley was first introduced in *Batman: The Animated Series*. Originally the Joker's psychiatrist, she falls in love with him and helps him escape Arkham Asylum. She spends a significant amount of time as his sidekick, where she is repeatedly abused as a form of comic relief. Harley is thrown out of windows, slapped across the face, sexually and emotionally abused by the Joker. Writers went as far as to write a plotline in which the Joker plans to kill her. Rather than using Harley's treatment to empower victims of abuse and give a voice to their experiences, she spent over two decades as a punch line. However, when she learns the Joker has plans to kill her, she joins up with Poison Ivy and Catwoman and begins having adventures independently from her abuser.

In *Harley Quinn #25*, Harley and the Joker reunite. Harley visits him in Arkham Asylum to get answers about an unrelated case. At Arkham, Harley, a well-educated and capable physiatrist, was manipulated into a life of crime and abuse. Rape victims are often forced to relive the pain of their abuse, especially if they choose to press charges against their rapists. For many victims, the assault can even take place in their own bed. Figure 3 depicts the intense discomfort Harley feels throughout their reunion.

Even in discomfort, there is strength and self-empowerment. Harley Quinn says, "It's amazing what a few years an' a lotta miles away from you and yer garbage can do fer a girl's self-respect." As most abusers do, the Joker immediately tries re-establishing his power, but Harley refuses. When the Joker forces a kiss, she responds by ripping off a piece of his lower lip. The character has come a long way from her first appearance in 1992; rather than reliving her trauma, she is empowered—not re-victimized.

Figure 3: Harley Quinn confronts the Joker

Rape happens in real life, but writers and creators have responsibilities when they depict rape and the severity of sexual assault, including its invisible effects on victims. Creators must find a way to illustrate the destructive consequences of sexual assault without depicting the act itself. Author Robert Jackson Bennett addressed this controversy, explaining that there are four questions all creators should ask themselves before they include sexual assault in a story:

> 1. What am I trying to do with this rape scene? What is its function? 2. Is this necessary to the plot? Will this book fall apart if this rape scene is not included? 3. Will this story focus more on the rapist than the victim? Will the victim essentially be forgotten? 4. If I swap out this rape victim with a young child, will audiences still accept this scene? Or will they find this scene wholly unnecessary, and condemn me for it? (Bennett, 2015).

While the first three points seem reasonable, Bennett's fourth point may be a little unsettling to some, as the rape of a six-year-old goes too far—children are innocent beings! But that raises the question, who exactly is deserving of rape? What is it about women's bodies that make it acceptable? Are we challenging the status quo by including rape scenes in our comics, our films, our books, or are we sending the message that this is okay, this is normal? Bennett closes his post with a series of critical questions for active participants in media:

> Why does this writer keep featuring scenes with this awful shit? Are they getting off on it? Do they think that I'm getting off on it?' And that's a

> tough question. Are you getting off on it? Are you including this rape scene for titillation, to be sensational, to set tongues a wagging [sic]? Are you using rape as a tool, a signal, a way to tell the reader that you mean business? (2015).

Not all comics showcase rape scenes to demonstrate the complex sufferings of victims of sexual violence. The *Jessica Jones* Netflix series follows private investigator Jessica Jones as she struggles to keep her superhero abilities hidden while simultaneously suffering from PTSD. Her trauma, viewers learn quickly, is the result of being repeatedly raped and used by Killgrave, a man who can control minds. But the sexual violence she experienced is never shown on screen. Viewers see the aftermath—her panic attacks, her alcoholism, her tendency to isolate herself from others, but there is no scene filled with shots of her exposed body as her abuser grunts on top of her. That is not necessary to understand the profound effect this experience has left on her life. In this way Jessica Jones is empowered, not revictimized—her panic attacks are halted by exercises taught to her by a therapist. She opens herself up to other people and reconnects with her childhood best friend while forming new and healthy relationships. She may fling bad guys three times her size across the room, but she is also emotionally resilient and refuses to be remade into a victim—survivors of sexual violence are not here to make plots more tantalizing or interesting. In this show, Marvel has created a narrative that is so painfully raw, while still ensuring the survivor has the final say, an example for DC Comics to follow in giving survivors the respect they rightfully deserve.

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